

# Europe's cultural and scientific heritage at a click of a mouse



One of the main objectives of the Digital libraries initiative is to achieve 'the European Digital Library', which will give citizens direct access from their computer to cultural collections from all Member States. A necessary condition for this is that the Member States invest in digitisation. It is also crucial to address the basic conditions for digitisation and online accessibility, such as certain aspects of copyrights.

## What are digital libraries?

Digital libraries are organised collections of digital content, which can be made available to the public. The content can be digital copies of books and other 'physical' material from Europe's many cultural institutions (libraries, archives, museums) or content that has been produced in digital format.

## What is the digital libraries initiative?

The digital libraries initiative is a flagship project of the Commission's overall strategy to boost the digital economy. It deals with two key areas: **cultural content** and **scientific information**.

## Towards a European digital library

Europe has a rich cultural heritage held by libraries, archives and museums across the continent. The digitisation and online availability of the collections will make them more accessible for Europe's citizens.

Once digitised, they can be used as input for new creative efforts and for a wide range of information products and services. They can, for example, play a key role in the future growth of sectors such as education and tourism.

Europe's cultural institutions have united forces in the [EDLnet project](#) (a thematic network trying to find consensual solutions to interoperability questions) to create the European digital library, a common multilingual access point to their digitised collections. The new digital library will be launched in 2008 and should give direct access to millions of objects held by participating collections. By 2010 the number

of objects and participating institutions will have multiplied and private content holders will also be encouraged to contribute.

The European digital library does not start from scratch, but builds on the work done by the library community in the [TEL-service](#) (a website which allows direct search in the collections of 47 European national libraries) and by other initiatives such as the [MICHAEL-project](#) (Multilingual inventory of cultural heritage in Europe – a portal to the collections of several European cultural institutions).

***We have books about Leonardo da Vinci, we have his drawings, films and pictures. The challenge is that they are spread out in different institutions all over Europe. The Digital libraries initiative allows us to find all these objects via a common access point, thanks to new technologies.***

## Prerequisites

To bring Europe's cultural heritage online and make it accessible at a click of a mouse, the right conditions for digitisation, online accessibility and the preservation of cultural content must be in place.

**Digitisation:** At present less than 1% of the collections of Europe's cultural institutions are available in digital format. Member States will have to step up their financial and organisational efforts to make the digitisation of their cultural heritage happen.

**Online accessibility:** Concrete solutions must be found for copyright issues, for example mechanisms to deal with "orphan" works (copyrighted works whose owners are very difficult or impossible to locate) and

works that are out of print, which is a large part of the collections of cultural institutions.

**Digital preservation:** Digital content must remain available for future generations. Storage media may degrade, computer systems become obsolete and encoding formats change, but there are still no clear strategies in place to deal with these problems.

On 24 August 2006 the **Commission** adopted a [Recommendation on the digitisation and online accessibility of cultural material and digital preservation](#). The Commission asks Member States to take action in different areas, ranging from copyright to setting up production lines for digitisation. It also calls upon Member States to tackle the preservation of digital content in a systematic way. **The Member State Ministers responsible for culture** received the Recommendation favourably ([Council conclusions](#) of 13 November, 2006). A [Member States Expert Group](#) is monitoring the implementation in the Member States.

### **Improving access to scientific information**

Information and communication tools and in particular the internet have changed the dynamics of the scientific information system. They make instant dissemination of information possible and allow researchers to share results, and to access journals and research data through their computers. This offers many opportunities, but also raises a number of questions about Europe's scientific information system.

The European Commission took a position on these questions in its [Communication on 'Scientific information in the digital age: access, dissemination, preservation'](#) of 14 February, 2007 and announced a first set of measures. The Communication deals with two key issues, access and preservation:

#### **1) How can we improve access to scientific information in the digital age?**

This issue has led to intense discussions between the research community and scientific publishers on the most efficient models to distribute scientific articles. Publishers on the one hand, and scientists, libraries and funding bodies on the other, have different views on issues such as open access and self-archiving in open repositories (digital libraries of scientific information) after an embargo period.

#### **2) How can we keep digital scientific information accessible and usable for future generations?**

Also in the area of scientific information, addressing digital preservation is crucial to avoid the loss of valuable research results and data.

### **How does the Commission contribute?**

The Commission contributes by:

- working together with cultural institutions to build the European Digital Library;
- fuelling the policy debate to improve the basic conditions for digital libraries in all Member States;
- bringing the stakeholders together to find ways forward for the most pressing issues. A [High Level Expert Group on digital libraries](#) advises the Commission in, for example, the area of copyrights and scientific information;
- co-funding:
  - The 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme for research and development co-funds research projects on digitisation and digital preservation, and infrastructures for scientific information.
  - within the [eContentplus programme](#) €60 million are available for digital libraries of cultural and scientific content.

***The real challenge is whether we can do better and last longer than the Alexandria Library, which was said to hold between 30-70% of the world's knowledge.***

#### **For further information:**

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